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“Unless I Am Overcome with Testimonies of Holy Scripture.”

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A number of conflicting interests were represented at the German Diet at Worms which was opened January 28, 1521, and closed May 25, but none could compare, as regards dignity and practical importance, with the two interests which clashed in the great hall of the *Bischofshof* as the sun was setting April 18. The dusk of evening that was dimming the splendor of that gorgeous scene was prophetic of the gloom that was settling on a false principle of authority in religion; the lone figure that stood before the tribunal of earth's mightiest Caesar and calmly voiced his determination not to yield to the order of an autocrat in an affair of conscience, was a flaming torch, typifying the “light at eventide”¹⁾ of which the prophet spoke. The empty seats of Aleander and Caraccioli, the papal nuntii, at that session of the Diet were a practical confession of their inability to match their man-supported claims of power against the God-given power which sustains the confessor of God's Word. Numerically, the odds were against *Luther*; spiritually, *Rome's* case was hopeless. The man with the Bible represents the true majority.

The division between Luther and the Curia had been drawn in ever sharper lines since the day when the Wittenberg professor had modestly raised the question: By what right is forgiveness of sin sold? During the forty months, until Luther started on his memorable journey to Worms, the question had been debated by the best talent that Rome could oppose to Luther; Luther had stood his ground against each of them, and as his knowledge of Rome's principle in the argument widened, his conviction that the

1) Zech. 14, 7.

principle was essentially false had gained in intensity. From the original questions that had been cast up: What is an indulgence? What is purgatory? What is a penance? What is repentance? etc., Luther had advanced to the *sola Scriptura* principle of authority in matters of faith. The concluding statement of his speech before the Diet sums up the conviction which had been matured in his mind during eighteen years of intensive Bible-study, two-thirds of which time he had spent in spiritual slavery to monasticism and in mental slavery to scholasticism.

"If the day," says Walther, "on which Luther published his Ninety-five Theses against the abomination of papal indulgences can, in a way, be called the birthday of the Reformation, the day on which Luther — in 1503 — for the first time held in his hand the entire Bible might well be called the day of its conception." 2) A happy thought! Luther's discovery of a copy of the complete Bible in the library of the University at Erfurt was greater than the discovery of America by Columbus which had occurred a decade sooner: the mariner of Genoa gave back to the world a lost continent; the friar of Wittenberg reopened to men the spiritual world of truth and righteousness and the royal highway to heaven in Christ. Luther's find in 1503 has occasionally been overemphasized by enthusiastic orators. Luther had, of course, known of the existence of the Bible even in his boyhood, and had heard and learned by heart portions of it. It had always been to him the revelation of God. But not until his days at the university did the Bible begin to be to him the exclusive source of infallible truth and the touchstone by which he tested all that he heard and read for its content of truth. A remark of one of his professors, Jodocus Trutfetter ("Dr. Eisenach"), aided him greatly towards a true estimate of the authority of Scripture. In 1518, when Trutfetter had become very bitter against Luther, whom he regarded as a precocious upstart in theology, Luther reminds his former teacher of a truth that he had learned from him: "If you will bear with the boldness of a pupil and a most obedient servant of yours, namely, myself, I would like to say that you are the first person from whom I learned that we are to yield faith only to the canonical writings, while we are to use all the rest critically, as the blessed Augustine, yea, Paul and John command." 3)

2) Dr. Walther, in *L. u. W.*, 1882, p. 49. To this article we are indebted for a number of the references that show the development of Luther's Biblicalism.

3) XV, 413.

One reason why Luther entered the cloister in 1505 was, because he hoped to obtain in the seclusion of the monastery that leisure for searching the Scriptures for which his bruised spirit was yearning. And one reason why the canonical duties of his order became so irksome to him was, because the canonical hours, the cloister chores, and the begging excursions in which he had to engage took him away from his Bible. He became a genius in finding time for his Bible amid the routine of cloister-life; to his colleagues he was a Bibliomaniac. His brother monk and former teacher at the university, Bartholomew von Usingen, one day reproved Luther when he found him again poring over the Latin Bible bound in red leather which has since become famous, and said: “Bah, Brother Martin, what is the Bible! We must read the old teachers; they have extracted the quintessence of the truth from the Bible.”⁴⁾

For years, however, Luther’s view of the authority of Scripture had remained encumbered with a baneful inconsistency: his reverence for the Roman Church and the authority of the Pope. There were occasions when he felt distracted over the discovery that Roman theology and Bible teaching clashed. He was anxiously casting about for means to harmonize the difference. He was wavering between the Roman *fides implicita* and the Christian *fides explicita*. He described his state of mind in this period in 1538, in the preface to a collection of theses for theological debates: “Many good men extolled my Theses, but it was impossible for me to acknowledge them to be the Church and instruments of the Holy Ghost. I looked up to the Pope, the cardinals, the bishops, the theologians, the jurists, the monks, and expected the Spirit from them. For I had gorged and filled myself with their teaching to such an extent that I did not realize whether I was asleep or waking. And after I had overcome all arguments with the Scriptures, I could in the end, even with the grace of Christ, scarcely get over this one point, except with the greatest difficulty and anguish, *viz.*, that we must hear the Church. For the Church of the Pope I regarded (and that with all my heart!) as the true Church, with much greater stubbornness and reverence than these abominable parasites are doing who are nowadays glorifying the Church of the Pope to spite me. If I had despised the Pope as his eulogizers are now doing, I would have believed that the earth must swallow me up that very minute, as it did Korah and his followers. But,

4) Walch, XXII, 35.

while waiting for the verdict of the Church and of the Holy Spirit, I was peremptorily ordered to keep silent, and my superiors appealed to the prevailing custom. Frightened by the authority of the name of the Church, I yielded and declared myself ready to Cardinal Cajetan at Augsburg to keep silent, begging him humbly to impose silence also on the clamorous opposition party. But he not only refused my request, but added that if I did not recant, he would condemn me and all my teachings, whatever they might be. But at that time I had already been teaching the Catechism with no little success, and I knew that the Catechism must not be condemned, and that I must not permit this to be done, lest I should deny Christ.⁵⁾

This means that in 1518 Luther was still troubled with the fearful qualms which an erring conscience can create. He was convinced that in his "Catechism," his Christian instruction for laymen, he had proclaimed unalloyed Bible truth, but he did not see that he must go on proclaiming those truths in opposition to papal decisions. The glamor of the Pope's exalted station in the Christian Church overawed him. It was this reflection which wrested from Luther the promise which he gave to Cajetan at Augsburg in 1518, *viz.*, that he would henceforth keep silent, provided his adversaries were enjoined from writing against him. The ruthless insistence of the Cardinal at that time, that Luther must recant everything that he had ever written, is now seen, in the light of later developments, to be an act of the permissive providence of God, by which the antibiblicism of Rome was to be revealed. In the haughty bearing of the Roman prelate Luther had the first taste of the fatal self-consciousness of papal absolutists, who seemed to feel it as a humiliation to be asked to prove any point in their position to an inquirer who questioned the correctness of their position. *Sic volo, sic jubeo; stat pro ratione voluntas*, that was the spirit in which Cajetan met Luther. Luther's criticism of a papal malpractise was never examined as to its intrinsic merit, but was resented *a priori* because it involved doubt or denial of the Pope's supremacy and the finality of his utterances. That explains the remarkable animus displayed by all who entered into debate with Luther. While Luther was discussing a dogmatical question, his opponents were defending the practical issue whether there can be any question raised in regard to anything that the Pope does or permits. Luther at Augsburg still distinguished between the Pope

5) XIV, 452.

and the Church; his opponent had lost all appreciation for such a distinction. Luther's twofold Appeal in 1518, from the Pope ill informed to the Pope to be better informed, and from the Pope to a general council of the Church, drew from well-meaning Catholics a pitying smile. It afforded amusement to the frivolous Italians who were conducting the affairs of the Church. *O sancta simplicitas!* they must have exclaimed when they heard of the action of this *bon Christian* in Germany, that is, of this blooming fool who was indulging in the senseless luxury of having a conscience in religious matters different from the will of their papal master. It roused the fanatical zeal of the great multitude of dependents upon the Curia who made a living, and that, a very good living, by preaching the religion of the Pope. Erasmus, with his extensive knowledge of the world, sized up the situation created by Luther's Theses correctly when he declared that Luther's only crime was that he had touched the Pope's crown and the monks' bellies.

Luther struggled long against admitting this view of the situation as the correct one, at least as far as it involved the person of the Pope. But the inexorable logic of tyrannous practises was forcing the issue step by step to the point at which every autocrat arrives sooner or later, the appeal to physical force. The debate at Leipzig in 1519 had a clarifying effect on Luther's view of the real issue which he had created. He had arranged that debate with Eck at Augsburg, however, not for himself, but for his colleague Carlstadt. Eck had been watching Luther's conduct during the interviews with Cajetan, and saw the opportunity for gathering fame and emolument which the crushing of this inconvenient monk opened up to any one who would defeat him in an argument. By unscrupulous tactics he had brought it about that Luther was drawn into a debate which he had arranged for another, that Luther became the principal to this debate, and that by the addition of the notorious thirteenth thesis the subject of the debate was changed from that of man's free will in spiritual matters to that of the supremacy of the Pope. During the debate on this subject which Luther had not chosen, Luther noticed with painful surprise that Eck's entire argument was built on tradition and human authorities, with a disregard of the teaching of Scripture. "It is no small wonder to me," he remarked in his rejoinder to one of Eck's eloquent excursus into the realm of patristic teaching, "that the Doctor has undertaken to establish the divine right of the papacy, and that to this day he has not adduced one syllable from

Scripture in support of his claim, but only statements and certain actions of the *fathers*, and that, such as contradict each other." Even when Eck attempted a Scripture-proof, he offered it on the strength of the interpretation which some Church Father had given to the passage in question. "He has built up his argument on the words: 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church,' which words, he says, have been interpreted by Augustine thus: 'Upon this rock, that is, upon Peter,' and this interpretation, he says, was never revoked. I answer: What is that to me? If he intends to argue against me, he will first have to harmonize his citation with the contrary statements of Augustine. For it is certain that Augustine has frequently interpreted 'rock' as referring to Christ, and in scarcely a single instance has he referred it to Peter. Accordingly, Augustine is speaking more on my side than against me. But even if Augustine and all the fathers had understood the rock to mean Peter, I should oppose him single-handed, on the authority of the apostle (that is, by a divine right), who writes 1 Cor. 3: 'Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ,' and on the authority of Peter in his First Epistle, chap. 2, where he calls Christ a 'living stone' and a 'corner-stone,' and teaches us to be 'built up a spiritual house.'" 6)

The numerous clashes in which he had to engage with leading Romanists after the Leipzig Debate made it ever clearer to Luther that Rome was determined not to bow to the authority of Scripture. When Rome, upon the instigation of Eck, closed the case against Luther by excommunicating him, unless he recanted within three times twenty days, Luther was convinced that he had come to the parting of the ways with the papacy, and proceeded to exhibit with crushing evidence Rome's false principle of authority in religion in his three great reformatory writings of 1520. In his *Appeal to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* he compares Rome to the walled city of Jericho. "May God now give us," he exclaims, "one of the trumpets by which the walls of Jericho were thrown down. . . . The second wall is . . . the claim that they alone are masters of the Bible. Although their whole life long they learn nothing in it, yet they presume to say that they alone understand it, and juggle with such words as that the Pope cannot err; be he bad or good, one cannot teach him a letter! It is for that reason that so many heretical and unchristian, yes, unnatural laws stand in the Canon Law. . . . The third wall falls of itself when the

6) Loescher, *Vollstaend. Ref.-Acta*, etc., III, 357 f.

first two are down; for when the Pope acts against Scripture, we are bound by Scripture to punish and compel him.” 7)

In his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* he demolished the entire sacramental theology of Rome by measuring it against the sole authority of the Scriptures and denouncing the favorite claim of Rome’s dogmaticians, that the Bible itself derives its authority from the Church, because the Church has determined what is the Bible. With overwhelming force he showed that faith in the Scriptures springs from the Scriptures, not from some papal deliverance concerning the Scriptures, that the Bible is self-authenticating, and exerts its power on man by its inherent virtue. “The Word of God is in an incomparable manner superior to the Church, and the Church has no power over Scripture to set up, ordain, or do anything, but is a creature that must itself be set up, ordained, and created by Scripture. Who could give birth to his own father or mother? Was there ever any one who first produced his author? . . . It is a shameful, iniquitous servitude that a Christian man, who is free, is subjected to when he is made to submit to other than the divine and heavenly doctrines. . . . At this point Christian fraternity ceases: the shepherds have become wolves, the servants tyrants, the spirituals worldlings.” 8)

In the Dedicatory Epistle which Luther appended to his treatise *On the Liberty of a Christian Man* Luther addressed Pope Leo X as follows: “Do not listen to the sweet sirens who are saying to you that you are not a mere man, but that there is in you a mixture of God, who has authority to command and require anything. This is not going to be, you will not accomplish it. You are a servant of all the servants of God, and in a more precarious and miserable state than any other man on earth. Be not deceived by those who lie and fawn to you, saying that you are a lord over all the world, who will suffer no one to be a Christian except he is subject to you, and who prate to you that you have power over heaven, hell, and purgatory. They are your enemies, they seek to destroy your soul. As Isaiah says: ‘My well-beloved, those who praise and exalt thee cause thee to err.’ 9) All who say to you that you are above a council and above Christendom in general err. All who ascribe to you alone authority to interpret the Scriptures err,” etc. 10)

7) X, 266 ff.

8) XIX, 4 ff.; especially cols. 108. 112. 113.

9) Is. 5, l. 9. 16; freely, according to the Vulgate.

10) XV, 783—795.

By a miracle of divine Providence Luther was summoned to Worms against the strenuous efforts of the papal legates and the Romanist party at the Diet. Appealing to the accepted Canon Law and to age-long practise, the representatives of the Pope had argued for nine months to the Emperor, to individual members of the Diet, and to the whole Diet in plenary sessions, that by the two bulls of excommunication¹¹⁾ Luther's case had become *res adjudicata*, settled with absolute finality by the only authority on earth that had jurisdiction in such a case (*Roma locuta est!*), and that to summon Luther for a hearing before the Diet would not only mean to reopen his case, which the Diet had no right to do, but it would also mean a practical denial of the supremacy of the Pope and, ultimately, a subversion of every other authority, since all authority of men in any condition of life was derived from the plenitude of spiritual and secular power with which the Pope was vested by Christ. The Diet which listened to Luther was in Rome's estimate an abomination: rebels giving an audience to an apostate. But the principle which Luther had been advocating for the last three years and a half had leavened a goodly part of Germany. Papistic arguments failed to impress men who believed that Scripture is above the Pope; and when the citation of Luther could not be averted, Rome's principal *chargé d'affaires* at the court of Charles V set to work, after the summons had already reached Luther and had been accepted, to change the purport of the citation, and succeeded in arranging a program for Luther's hearing on April 17 by which a gag was put into Luther's mouth, and he was told that he had been summoned only to state whether he would recant. To the very last the principle of autocracy was applied to Luther. But once more a higher Power thwarted the tyrannical design of Rome, and it is to that interference that the world owes the great speech of the Reformer of April 18, which rang out in the glorious appeal to the Scriptures.

That day at Worms is the birthday of the Lutheran Church: from its incipiency the Lutheran Church is cradled in the *sola Scriptura* principle. It came into existence as the standing antithesis to every false principle of authority in matters of faith and conscience. It started on its remarkable career as the great spiritual teacher of men who inculcated upon men the truth that in

11) *Exsurge Domine*, June 15, 1520, and *Decet Romanum Pontificem*, January 3, 1521.

the domain of man's spiritual interests the Word of God is the supreme and sole arbiter. That principle is the vital element in the faith of Lutherans, and with that principle — and the other which is embodied in it as its most precious content, *sola gratia* — the Lutheran Church stands or falls.
